

The Battle

SITUATION

After four years of war, the Southern Confederacy was nearing collapse. Among most Southern leaders, the hope of defeating the North had vanished. However, they knew to secure an equitable peace Southern soldiers had to stand firm on the battlefield. The need for a Confederate victory to force negotiation was obvious to both Southern leaders and soldiers.

The Confederacy was isolated and starving. The loss of the Mississippi River in 1863 and an increasingly effective naval blockade had slowed Southern import and export to a trickle. Manufacturing had virtually ceased, and the Confederacy's reserves of manpower and materiel were exhausted.

At Petersburg, Virginia, *General Robert E. Lee's, C.S.A., Army of Northern Virginia*, much reduced by attrition, faced a vastly superior Federal force. As the strength of the Federal Army continued to increase, *General Lee's* ability to maneuver diminished. A static situation had developed, compelling both sides to entrench and await opportunity.

Further South, General William T. Sherman's, U.S.A., hard-marching Federal force had captured Atlanta, Georgia in September 1864. General Sherman followed his successful Atlanta campaign with his much heralded "March to the Sea."

General Sherman's intent was to cut a path of destruction through the South, bringing the horror of war home to the Southern people. The destruction General Sherman's men wrought went beyond the usual militarily significant targets. Because the Federal Army had abandoned its supply line when departing Atlanta, it was necessary for Federal soldiers to live off the land. Once Sherman's Army passed through an area, little was left for civilian use or to support the Confederate Army.

By demonstrating the North's ability to march through the very heart of Dixie, General Sherman thought he could undermine support for continued resistance. His threat to Southern homes did increase desertions among Confederate soldiers in the field¹⁴.

General Sherman's force enjoyed minimal resistance on the march. *Lieutenant General Wheeler's* Confederate Cavalry attacked Federal

foraging parties and elements that strayed too far from the main body, but *Lieutenant General Wheeler* could do little else other than monitor General Sherman's progress. The culmination of the march was the capture and occupation of Savannah, Georgia on December 21, 1864.

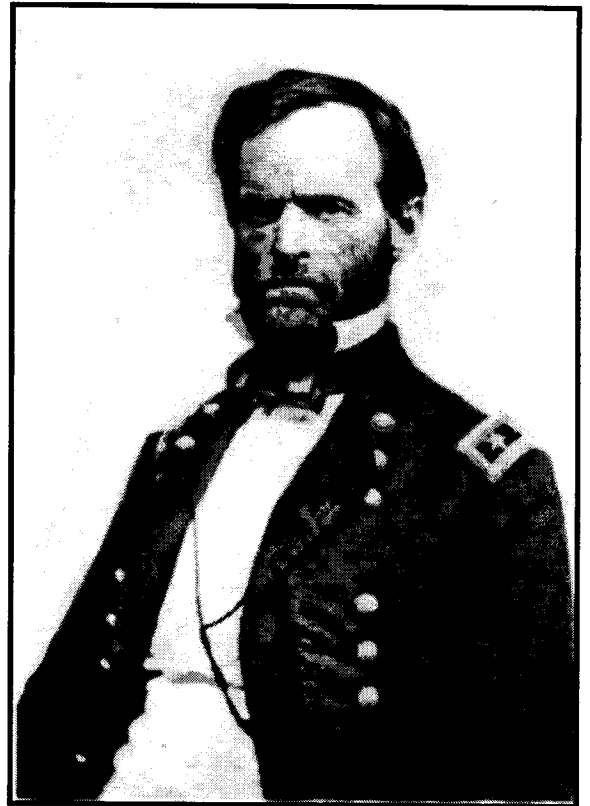


Figure 7 — General William T. Sherman, U.S.A. (U.S. Army)

During several weeks of rest and refitting in Savannah, General Sherman contemplated his next move. The course of action he favored was to continue the march northward through the Carolinas and link up with General Grant in Virginia. General Grant, who initially wanted to extract General Sherman's force by sea for transport to Virginia, acquiesced to General Sherman's plan.

On January 19, 1865, General Sherman moved into South Carolina, exacting the same punishment on South Carolina that he had on Georgia. Attempting to impede General Sherman's progress, the Confederate Cavalry maintained contact with the Federal force. Firefights became a daily occurrence. Skirmishing with Confederate Cavalry, General Sherman's men entered Columbia, South Carolina on

the 17th of February. During a night of destruction, the city caught fire and by morning was a smoldering ruin.

In North Carolina, the citizenry listened to the stories of refugees and read newspaper accounts of events occurring in South Carolina. Rumors were rampant as Sherman's Army continued toward the state line. Reports of the burning of Columbia prompted calls on the Confederate Government to do something. Assurances that the invaders would be repelled did little to lessen citizen foreboding. North Carolina newspapers ran patriotic articles; rallies occurred, with many participants taking oaths to fight to the end.

On the 25th of February, Confederate *General Joseph E. Johnston, C.S.A.*, assumed command of the *Army of Tennessee* and the *Departments of Tennessee, Georgia, South Carolina, and Florida*. It was *General Johnston's* responsibility to stop General Sherman.

General Johnston established his headquarters in Charlotte, North Carolina. With General Sherman moving north, threatening the midsection of the state, it was probable Charlotte would be his objective. *General Johnston's* problem was his lack of troops.

In route to join *General Johnston* were elements of the Confederate *Army of Tennessee* and *Lieutenant General William J. Hardee's, C.S.A., Corps*. *Lieutenant General Hardee* had abandoned Savannah to General Sherman in December. After leaving Savannah, *Lieutenant General Hardee* had moved northward through South Carolina and was nearing the North Carolina state line. However, elements of the *Army of Tennessee* were still some days away.

As a result of continued harassment from the Federal base at New Bern, North Carolina and the attack on Fort Fisher on the 13th of January, Confederate forces within the state had been drawn to the coast. With Federal Major General A.H. Terry's, U.S.A., capture of Fort Fisher on January 15th, the threat of a two-pronged Federal invasion from the coast was great. This threat made it necessary for large numbers of Confederate troops to remain in eastern North Carolina to repel any inland incursions by Federal forces.

MISSION

General Sherman considered two options for the impending campaign in North Carolina: to continue

north through Charlotte, Salisbury, and Greensboro, and invade western Virginia or to feint in the direction of Charlotte while turning his main body eastward toward Fayetteville, North Carolina¹⁵.

Federal successes along the coast, General Sherman's need for resupply, and the less restrictive ground to the east made the latter more attractive.



Figure 8 — *Lieutenant General Joseph Wheeler, C.S.A. (U.S. Army)*

The course of action selected was to turn eastward and march on the intermediate objective, Fayetteville. The maneuver would threaten both Raleigh and Goldsboro and be conducted in cooperation with thrusts inland by Federal forces from the coast. From Fayetteville, General Sherman would move northeastward toward his main objective, Goldsboro, and link up with Federal forces moving in from the east and southeast.

Fayetteville, located at the highest navigable point of the Cape Fear River, would allow resupply from and communication with Federal forces in Wilmington.

Also, a large number of Confederate troops were west of the Cape Fear River awaiting an indication of General Sherman's intentions. If Federal deceptions worked, General Sherman could beat the Confederates to Fayetteville, seize the bridges over the Cape Fear River, and trap the Confederates on the western side. If the Federal force didn't reach Fayetteville first, they could still arrive in time to catch the Confederates in the vulnerable position of crossing the river.

From the coast, Federal forces under the command of Major General John M. Schofield, U.S.A., would move inland from their respective bases toward Goldsboro. Moving northward from Wilmington were Major General Terry and the X Corps; pushing westward from New Bern were Major General Jacob D. Cox, U.S.A., and the XXIII Corps.

To deceive the Confederates, General Sherman continued northward with his four Corps toward Charlotte. General Sherman's force was organized in two wings; the left consisted of the XIV and XX corps and the right the XV and XVII Corps. Sherman's Cavalry Division, commanded by Brevet Major General Kilpatrick, operated well forward, as if scouting a route to Charlotte. Once this demonstration had its effect, General Sherman planned to turn abruptly eastward, drawing his cavalry back in to screen his left flank.

At Fayetteville, General Sherman intended to raze the Federal arsenal and rendezvous with supply laden gunboats sent up the Cape Fear River from Wilmington.

The New Times March 1865:

It is quite evident that SHERMAN'S route into North Carolina was by far the best. At Columbia, two paths lay before him, each promising certain advantages. The one which his previous course had indicated as probable leads directly up the railroad to Charlotte, thence to Salisbury, thence to Greensboro.

Could this have been successfully pursued, its results would have been astonishing. First, it would have secured the three great railroad junctions already named and insured the destruction of hundreds of miles of the chief railway left to the Confederacy. Next, the slightest easterly advance from Greensboro would have forced the evacuation and capture of Raleigh. Finally, his columns would have threatened Lynchburg from the west, and would have cut off LEE'S retreat from Richmond, by interposing an army on his front and flank. But it was too dangerous an experiment. It involved the traversing of distances too enormous even for that strategy which has struck the world with astonishment by its

boldness during the latter year of the war. It exposed SHERMAN'S army to the certainty of a series of battles. If successful, they would have cost him all his ammunition, and he would have been forced to drop his conquests, and retreat from his victories. If unsuccessful, they would have left him hundreds of miles from succor, and with a Moscow retreat to the coast as his only alternative.

The lower route was judiciously chosen. It has proved to be attended by advantages greater than those of the other, and by none of its perils. By moving from Columbia to Cheraw, and from Cheraw across toward Fayetteville, SHERMAN has outgeneraled JOHNSTON again, marching past his flank, and forcing him to follow at a rapid pace if he wishes to fight. Being compelled himself to march, he forces that necessity also upon his opponent. He takes away the enemy's hope of successful concentration far up in the mountainous region, where defeat to SHERMAN would be destruction. JOHNSTON, who had watched to see whether unparalleled success would turn the head of his adversary, again baffled and disappointed.

This move, also, puts SHERMAN in direct cooperation with SCHOFIELD. He can get supplies and ammunition from the latter by way of the Cape Fear River, in case of needing them. He has a base to fall back upon in case of disaster. He is now traversing a region which no army has trod. It is high, fertile, and full of supplies. The roads are excellent, and now in good condition. The marshes which stretch away to the southeast, toward the coast, do not reach so high as SHERMAN'S present position. The people are well-to-do and, better than all, as loyal as in any part of the South. If anywhere in North Carolina supplies are to be had, it is precisely in the country SHERMAN is now traversing. The present movement, also, directly aids SCHOFIELD'S task, by forcing the enemy to withdraw from his front, to avoid being flanked. Even Raleigh is quite as directly threatened by this route as by the other, and

Table 5
Weather and Light Conditions for Early March in the Monroe’s Crossroads Area¹⁶

Date	Sun Rise	Begin Morning Nautical Twilight	Sun Set	End Evening Nautical Twilight	Moon Rise	Moon Set	% Lunar Illumination
Wednesday March 1	06:45	05:50	18:07	19:02	9:10	22:52	24%
Thursday March 2	06:43	05:48	18:08	19:03	9:56	23:57	33%
Friday March 3	06:42	05:47	18:09	19:04	10:44	00:04	42%
Saturday March 4	06:41	05:46	18:10	19:05	11:34	00:59	52%
Sunday March 5	06:39	05:44	18:10	19:05	12:28	01:54	62%
Monday March 6	06:38	05:43	18:11	19:06	13:31	02:44	72%
Tuesday March 7	06:37	05:42	18:12	19:07	14:15	03:28	80%
Wednesday March 8	06:35	05:40	18:13	19:08	15:11	04:08	87%
Thursday March 9	06:34	05:39	18:14	19:09	16:06	04:45	94%
Friday March 10	06:33	05:38	18:15	19:10	17:00	05:18	97%
Saturday March 11	06:31	05:36	18:16	19:11	17:54	05:50	98%

The prevailing winds in the Monroe’s Crossroads area are from the southwest. The average wind speed is highest in the Spring, about nine miles per hour. Throughout March in 1865, the weather in southeastern North Carolina was cool and rainy. The frequent rains indicate that temperatures tended to be above freezing. The nights would have been colder than the days. Roads were wet and muddy. With the creeks and rivers running high, fording points and approaches to bridges were often flooded. Adjacent wetlands stayed at flood stage. The rain ceased before dawn on 10 March at Monroe’s Crossroads.

During the night, visibility was poor, with the light from the moon limited because of the cloudy skies and rain. Because of the sparse population in the area, there was little, if any, ambient light from towns or homes. Distant stores of turpentine, tar, and pitch, set ablaze by the Union Army, possibly reflected off the clouds. Campfires lit by Kilpatrick’s Cavalry would have revealed the location of the Union camp.

Twilight on 10 March began at 05:38. Sunrise occurred at 06:33. During the Confederate assault, ground fog obscured low areas along Nicholson Creek. The fog probably dissipated completely about an hour after sunrise.

Goldsboro still more so. But the taking of Raleigh will produce the evacuation of Goldsboro. Neither point is likely to be given up without a struggle, for the loss will signify too surely the loss of Richmond.
Such, then, are the moves by which the

forces of the Union have been marshaled into position on the North Carolina field. The genius of the preparation is the best augury of success.

General Johnston had few options. Lieutenant

General Hardee's 6,000 man Corps was in close proximity to General Sherman's 60,000 man force and could delay it for a short time, but could be expected to do little else against such overwhelming odds.

Besides, with Confederate troops in short supply, the possible loss of *Hardee's Corps* was unacceptable. Elements of the *Army of Tennessee* were moving into the state, but even these additions left the Confederate force greatly inferior. When all expected forces were present, *General Johnston* could expect his men to number no more than 30,000.

General Johnston's hope for success was to concentrate as much force as he could muster against one wing of Sherman's Army. Compelled by terrain or the execution of a feint, General Sherman's wings were at times beyond immediate supporting distance of one another. If *General Johnston* could predict this occurrence, he could attack one wing and destroy it, thus evening the odds.

Using the cavalry of *Lieutenant General Wheeler* and *Major General Matthew C. Butler, C.S.A.*, *General Johnston* planned to delay Sherman while he organized his forces.

With the Confederate Cavalry delaying and providing information on General Sherman's movement, *General Johnston* should have enough time to put his plan into action.

EXECUTION

1 March 1865

Lieutenant General Hardee's Corps reached Cheraw, South Carolina, 10 miles south of the North Carolina state line.

2 March 1865

The vanguard of General Sherman's XX Corps entered Chesterfield, South Carolina, skirmishing with *Major General Butler's* Cavalry.

Federal Cavalry Commander Brevet Major General Kilpatrick was ordered to keep well on the left flank of the XIV Army Corps. Much to his satisfaction, he was also given permission to occupy Fayetteville first.

3 March 1865

Evening

Brevet Major General Kilpatrick's 1st Cavalry

Brigade entered North Carolina on the Wadesborough Road, encamping four miles from the state line. Having crossed into Anson County, North Carolina, Brevet Major General Kilpatrick's 3rd Brigade went into camp.

The Confederate Cavalry wasted little time in making their presence and displeasure known.

Colonel George E. Spencer, U.S.A., 1st Alabama (U.S.) Cavalry, Commanding, 3rd Brigade, 3rd Cavalry Division¹⁷:

On the morning of the 3rd of March we resumed our line of march, on the left, through a clay country with horrible roads and traveled a distance of 10 miles, when we went into camp in Anson County, N.C., about three miles from the state line.

We had hardly placed our pickets out when they were driven in by General Hampton's Cavalry. The command was quickly thrown into position and we awaited attack. A small force of the enemy attempted to charge the extreme right of our line, when a few shells from Lieutenant Stetson's section quickly scattered them. We remained in position, expecting an attack, till next morning, when we again resumed our line of march.

The 4th Cavalry Brigade, consisting of dismounted men, had accompanied the 3rd Brigade on the march. The 4th Brigade (dismounted) took up position on the Hornsborough Road in the center of the 3rd Brigade and was immediately attacked.

Lieutenant Colonel William B. Way, U.S.A., Commanding, 4th Cavalry Brigade (dismounted), 3rd Cavalry Division¹⁸:

We had but just got into position, with a strong picket, well barricaded, when the enemy charged my picket, but was handsomely repulsed, with loss upon our side of one man wounded.

2300

The 4th Brigade (dismounted) took charge of the Division trains and artillery, moving them some five miles to Brevet Major General Kilpatrick's headquarters. Heavy rains were falling, and the roads were made almost impassable.

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